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# Neighbors Engaging In Dialogue: A University-Community Partnership

Pete Miller

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*The purpose of this case study was to learn more about the emergence and development of the Rogers Community Learning Center over its initial 5 years of operation. The interview, observation, and documental data were viewed through a theoretical lens informed by the work of Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, and Cornel West in order to examine how notions of history, culture, and power affected the collaborative work of the Rogers Center. The findings indicated that the disconnect and distrust that previously described the relationship between St. Benedict University and its adjacent Northeast Neighborhood were mitigated to a degree by the work of the Rogers Center. Although Northeast Neighborhood residents expressed gratitude for the many educational and social opportunities present at the Rogers Center, their value for being engaged as equal partners by St. Benedict's resonated most clearly as the foundational element to their emerging friendship. The article concludes with several suggestions that attempt to assist the continued development of the Rogers Center and also serve as helpful insights for other partnerships that seek similar relationships.*

## Introduction

In July 2000, leaders from St. Benedict University (pseudonyms are used for all individuals, institutions, organizations, and geographic locations throughout this study), a Catholic university in the United States, reviewed and approved plans for the development of a university-sponsored community multipurpose building in its bordering Northeast Neighborhood of Center City. This center, which eventually opened in 2001 as the Rogers Community Learning Center (RCLC), was to focus predominantly on issues related to education. The RCLC was the first aspect of St. Benedict's larger Northeast Neighborhood Initiative, which includes the building of new homes, changes to the local road infrastructure, and the development of new commercial entities to be implemented. Various phases of planning and development were closely monitored by local residents whose previous interactions with the university were infrequent or commonly perceived in a negative light.

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the emergence and development of the RCLC since 2001. Specifically, an in-depth qualitative examination of the collaborative processes undertaken by St. Benedict and Northeast Neighborhood partners was conducted in order to benefit both this partnership and others like it around the country. After a brief description of the Northeast Neighborhood, the rationale and contextualization of this study in the broader field of research on university-community partnerships is provided.

### ***RCLC Context: The Northeast Neighborhood***

The RCLC is housed in what was formerly a neighborhood grocery and Goodwill store and is located in the heart of Center City's Northeast Neighborhood (NEN) less than a half mile from the St. Benedict campus. Approximately 6,000 residents live in the NEN. In many ways, a dichotomy can be seen between St. Benedict—an institution that is characterized to a significant degree by famous scholars, privileged students, carefully manicured grounds, and highly successful sports teams—and the NEN. In comparison with most other parts of the city, the NEN has higher housing vacancy rates, higher unemployment rates, lower high school graduation rates, and lower income levels. In relation to these factors, the NEN lost 28% of its population between 1970 and 1990 (Northeast Neighborhood Association, 1999). Despite such troubling statistics, the longtime residents of the NEN describe deep affection for and loyalty to their community. They cite neighborhood assets such as its racial diversity (40% of NEN residents are African American), age diversity (16% over age 65 and 26% under age 18), and active church communities as being foundational to the NEN's historical and current character—as well as its projected future growth (Northeast Neighborhood Association, 1999). One of the stated purposes of the RCLC is to bridge the dichotomy between the campus and the community by building upon these neighborhood strengths for mutual benefit.

### ***Research Context: University-Community Collaboration***

University-community partnerships are increasingly common and are widely diverse in their manifestations, which include but are not limited to service-learning classes, after-school tutoring programs, student teaching relationships, neighborhood development initiatives, and university-community health care programs. The literature suggests that there are numerous indicators of successful university-community collaborations such as these. Some of these indicators include mutuality (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Bryk &

Rollow, 1996; Holland, 2001; Maurrasse, 2001, 2002; Mayfield, Hellwig, & Banks, 1999; Schorr, 1997; Zetlin & MacLeod, 1995), supportive infrastructures (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Carr, 1999; Holland, 2001; Jacoby, 2003; Maurrasse, 2001, 2002), rigorous evaluation (Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996; Gelmon, 2000; Maurrasse, 2002), supportive leadership (Astin & Astin, 2000; Boyer, 1990; Jacoby, 2003), university immersion in the community (Maurrasse, 2001; Zacharakis-Jutz & Heaney, 1991), and assets-based programming (Perkins, Crim, Silberman, & Brown, 2003; Schorr, 1997). Although success looks different in each partnership, depending upon its specific orientation and goals, these indicators are seen as central elements of all successful collaborative efforts between universities, schools, and communities.

Greater than token goodwill efforts to improve relations between town-and-gown, the functions of university-community partnerships are substantially linked to the welfare and growth of all parties. Some collaborations aim to benefit their partners in small or immediate ways, while others seek long-term, systemic improvements. Unfortunately, as they seek to create change, collaborative relationships are often faced with dilemmas that can limit their success, including the fact that all collaborative relationships between diverse partners and organizations are complex and difficult (Johnson & Oliver, 1991), the values of academia do not reward faculty for involvement in partnerships (Ascher & Schwartz, 1989; Gronski & Pigg, 2000), flawed processes are commonly employed (Bryk & Rollow, 1996), and racial/cultural tensions exist (Darder, 1994; Mayfield et al., 1999; Perkins et al., 2003). The dilemma that most pervades the literature, however, is that partnerships have inequitable distributions of power (Ascher & Schwartz, 1989; Miller, 2005a, 2006; Maurrasse, 2001). Amid claims of equality, colleges often possess financial and intellectual resources that allow them to control most aspects of the collaborations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As more and more collaborative initiatives attempt to avoid the historical tendency that university participants have to dominate their relationships with neighborhood partners, alternative community centering evaluative frameworks have increased utility. There is a need to listen systematically to the perspectives of these participants who have traditionally been marginalized. More must be learned about their impressions of how partners work together. Indeed, although various assessment models have been posited to indicate whether civic engagement outcomes are successful (Cruz & Giles, 2000;

Driscoll et al., 1996; Ferrari & Worrall, 2000; Gelmon, 2000; Vernon & Ward, 1999), Maurrasse (2002) suggests that more university-community partnership programs must begin regularly assessing their processes, meaning the planning, implementation, and evaluation that are employed.

Therefore, this study's theoretical grounding draws from a refined framework for the critical evaluation of campus-community partnerships (Miller, 2004, 2005a, 2005b). Specifically, this line of qualitative inquiry attempts to center the voices of traditionally marginalized participants in collaborative endeavors by drawing from the works of three interdisciplinary educators and activists: Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, and Cornel West. It is asserted that campus-community partnership processes that are guided by critically dialogic perspectives similar to those espoused by Freire, Horton, and West will result in mutual respect and benefit among and between diverse partners.

This framework conceptualizes collaborative processes between campus and community as dialogue between equal partners. Drawing from some central dialogical tenets described by Freire (1970), this model seeks to dismantle the identity-based role stratification that commonly plagues partnerships. It consciously attempts to normalize horizontal interactions among campus and community partners rather than reaffirm entrenched hierarchical models through the subtle neglect of ever-present power dynamics. The framework is rooted in Freirean notions of humility, faith in the people, and hope, and gains further insights from Horton and West. A basic description of its guiding tenets is described next.

### ***Humility***

According to Freire (1970), there is no room in dialogue for arrogance. Freire wrote:

The naming of the world, through which people constantly re-create that world, cannot be an act of arrogance. Dialogue, as the encounter of those addressed in the common task of learning and acting, is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack humility. (p. 90)

With this in mind, Freire stated that leaders, many of whom are university-based in civic engagement contexts, must go to the people humbly, openly, and ready to listen to their ideas. "At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together to learn more than they now know" (p. 90).

### ***Faith in Humankind***

Freire (1970) claimed that true dialogue is characterized by intense faith in the inherent capabilities of all people to name their realities and to transform them. He wrote, "Faith in people is an *a priori* requirement for dialogue; the 'dialogical person' believes in others even before he meets them face to face" (pp. 90-91). The absence of this faith brings forth deficit perspectives of those who are oppressed.

Horton (as cited in Adams, 1975) provided a good example of Freirean faith describing the experience of working with poor people at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee: "You see, the problem is that we have to have enough confidence in the people in Appalachia to believe that our job is to help them save themselves. Instead of for us to save people" (p. 107). Horton further described this faith as being rooted in the people: "One of my friends, a minister, wrote me one time that Highlander was a faith venture. I suppose it is. But our faith is not in a method, or any kind of educational approach, but in people themselves" (p. 177).

Like Horton's "confidence" in the people, Freirean faith counters models of education and/or collaboration that place power in the hands of outside "experts." Rather, it acknowledges and builds upon the knowledge and experiences of the people.

### ***Hope***

Contrary to commonly expressed fatalistic discourses that pervade theoretical literature relating to various oppressive structures and conditions, Freire's notion of dialogue is rooted in hope that better conditions can be achieved. Freire believed that oppression is a limiter, not an absolute prohibitor. Darder (2002) described this belief:

Paulo Freire argued forcefully that poverty, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of discrimination are not natural traits of our humanity. Instead, these conditions exist as "naturalized" aberrations invented within history by human beings. And because this is so, oppression in all its faces can be "reinvented" out of existence. (p. 31)

With hope, Freire (1998) asserted that the actions of the people can remain (or become) purpose filled and meaningful.

West (1993) reiterated the importance of hope in communities that have traditionally been oppressed:

For as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive. The self-fulfilling prophecy of the nihilistic threat is that without hope there can be no future, that without meaning there can be no struggle. (p. 23)

These tenets—humility, faith in humankind, and hope—served as the theoretical framework for the much-needed systematic listening to community voices in the RCLC partnership context. They guided the study's data collection and analysis in its effort to describe the ways and extents to which this collaborative endeavor has been and has not been dialogical.

### **Research Design and Methods**

Because it was the goal of this study to provide an in-depth understanding of the perceived effectiveness of a university-community partnership, qualitative case study research methods were appropriate. It was not the intent of this study to reveal broadly generalizable characteristics of effective collaborative processes between universities and the communities in which they are imbedded. Rather, qualitative interviews, observations, and document analyses produced data that lend a depth of understanding that would not have been gained by employing quantitative methods. Such data, after being coded and analyzed, led to insights and conclusions that have significant transferability value for all who are interested in learning more about the planning, implementation, and evaluation of university-community partnerships. Indeed, the intents and purposes of this study were dictated by critical and constructivist paradigms that seek to understand some characteristics of university-community collaboration, not the effective characteristics of university-community collaboration.

### ***Participants***

Using criterion sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), all of the 19 interview participants in this study were associated with the RCLC in some capacity. They were representative of the various perspectives that are affiliated with this partnership, including NEN residents, parents, and activists; university administrators, faculty, staff, and students; and RCLC staff members.

As previously mentioned, one of the central foci of this study was to learn more about the experiences of this partnership from the perspectives of community members. Therefore, it was vital that the community participants selected for this study were willing and able to share openly their personal beliefs, expectations, and concerns relating to the RCLC. In other words, as

Patton (1990) suggested, the logic behind this purposeful selection of informants is that the sample should be information rich.

It is important to note that an active effort was made to involve a racially, culturally, and professionally diverse group of participants in this study. Great value was placed on gaining insights from a wide array of perspectives.

### ***Sources of Data: Interviews, Observations, and Document Analysis***

The interviews for this study were semi-structured, meaning that specific questions were prepared for the participants, but unplanned clarifying questions were also used throughout the interviews (Creswell, 1998). The interviews were held at locations identified as most convenient for each participant, lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours, and were tape recorded.

In addition to interviews, observations of RCLC programs and interactions provided a valuable source of data triangulation that added to the credibility and trustworthiness of this study. As Adler and Adler (1994) asserted, observations provide a “powerful source of validation” (p. 389).

Finally, the inclusion of hundreds of pages of documents and records as sources of data also added to the rigor of this study. The examination and analysis of items such as planning documents, promotional literature, and newspaper articles certainly built upon and contributed to the coherence of some findings from the interviews and observations, and called into question other aspects of these findings.

### ***Data Analysis***

To identify convergence in the data (Patton, 1990), the transcripts of the interviews and notes from the observations and document analyses were coded. From this open coding process, common themes emerged. To discern the relationships between these major emergent themes, an axial coding process was next utilized. Huberman and Miles (1994) described this process as characterized by clustering themes into conceptual groupings, making metaphors for the integration of diverse pieces of data, subsuming particulars into the general, shuttling back and forth between first-level data and more general categories, noting relations between variables, building a chain of evidence, and making conceptual/theoretical coherence.

After the data were open and axial coded and the emergent themes were inductively identified and relationally described, the major components of the previously defined dialogical framework were deductively applied. Ultimately, the purpose of this analysis was to lend clarity to the



characterization of this partnership process as one that does (or does not) create a horizontal dialogical relationship.

## **Findings**

### ***Collaborating with Historical Awareness***

Among the most noteworthy of findings from this study was the clear indication that both an understanding of and a respect for local history were shared by the participants in the RCLC. Throughout the planning and implementation phases of the RCLC, these participants (both university- and neighborhood-based) voiced recognition and conscious, ongoing awareness of the past relationship between the university and the neighborhood. This relationship was largely characterized with terms such as “disconnect” and “distrust.” For example, NEN resident Natasha Lanier explained her long-standing perception of the university:

I’ve always seen St. Benedict as separate from the Center City community....  
It was always, they want their own little area and are not really a part of us....  
It was always like they were higher, I don’t know the word I want to say...elite.  
Above all the rest.

Her indication that St. Benedict and the NEN functioned in separate, rarely intersecting worlds was substantiated by Monica Turner, a lifelong resident of the NEN and current RCLC employee, who described:

My dad is 83 and he’s lived in that same house [in the NEN] for over 60 years and [until last week] he’d never been on the campus....I really don’t think that this is that uncommon for many of the people who live this close to the university.

Indeed, the frequently alluded to disconnect between the campus and community were made startlingly concrete by the story of Monica’s father.

Adding to the troubled depiction of the relationship was the assertion made by Denise Callaway, another lifelong resident of the NEN, that the few instances of interaction between the university and its local neighbors were negative ones. In speaking about the only “St. Benedict faces” she regularly saw—undergraduate students who rented NEN houses—she recalled, “They had no respect for anybody. They’d walk in the middle of the street when you’re trying to drive. It was terrible.”

The perceptions of NEN residents regarding their pre-RCLC relationship with St. Benedict were quite negatively described. Their feelings of

disconnect from and distrust in the university were exacerbated in 1998 when they learned that St. Benedict had purchased Aldi's and Goodwill, the neighborhood stores that had long been NEN centers of shopping and social interaction. Without knowledge of the process that preceded this purchase (Aldi's and Goodwill had, in fact, approached the university about the sale on their own volition because they wanted to pull out of the neighborhood), many NEN residents immediately concluded that this was a predatory transaction—St. Benedict was making a purposeful attempt to take over the neighborhood. Denise Callaway recalled:

We were all very upset....because Aldi's was close and Goodwill was close and we felt that St. Benedict took everything away from us. And I wasn't the only one that was upset, we all were upset....So we talked about it and talked about it.

Lon Norton, a St. Benedict administrator who had a central role in St. Benedict's developing relationship with the NEN, similarly remembered:

St. Benedict bought it for defensive reasons and it went over like a lead balloon in the neighborhood because this was the only place that the neighbors actually experienced social capital in that neighborhood. It's the place where the elderly came together buying food and clothing and furniture that they actually saw each other. It was a place where social relationships, in a sense, were advanced.

Although St. Benedict administrators told NEN residents that the university had no intent to take over the neighborhood, their words were not altogether believed. Many residents were convinced that St. Benedict's real agenda in the NEN was being hidden from them. Reflecting back on this tumultuous time, Monica Turner recalled, "It actually wasn't a conspiracy, but you couldn't tell everyone in the neighborhood that." Simply put, the neighborhood did not trust St. Benedict.

It was with a keen awareness of this troubled past that several key individuals began to make inroads toward repairing the St. Benedict-NEN relationship in the years after the Aldi's/Goodwill purchase. Their ability to garner the trust and respect of both town-and-gown constituents was a critical element to the collaborative infrastructure upon which the RCLC was ultimately built.

### ***Leadership That Builds Bridges***

As St. Benedict officials considered what to do with its recently acquired space at the former Aldi's/Goodwill, they decided that they wanted to gain input from their NEN neighbors about the local community's desires for the building. Because many NEN residents had little trust in the intentions of St. Benedict the institution, it was soon realized that the university's initial interface with its neighbors would have to be carried out by selected individuals who were trusted by both St. Benedict and the NEN. Jim Plunket, a St. Benedict employee, explained that, "it is easy to cast dispersions on institutions—but not so easy when it is an individual." To this end, numerous university, neighborhood, and city-based individuals were mentioned as important actors in these early interactions. However, the essential roles of five particular leaders—"the urban president," "the boundary-spanning administrator," "the people's priest," "the passionate advocate" and "the humble director"—emerged most clearly from the data as being central figures in the initial planning conversations for the Aldi's/Goodwill space, the healing of the relationship between St. Benedict and the NEN and, ultimately, the development and success of the RCLC.

*The urban president.* Father Earl Munrow, the president of St. Benedict, was certainly one of the most frequently mentioned central figures in the development of the RCLC. His disposition as a self-described "urban person," who places great value on campus-community connections, influenced his support for the RCLC project. With home town roots in the region and significant exposure to and understanding of the conflicts that are so typical between institutions of higher education and their neighboring communities, Fr. Munrow was committed to repairing the relationship between the university and the NEN by collaborating together on a "common project." He said:

If you know the history of higher education around the world, there's always some concern about the relationship between the university and the surrounding neighborhoods....I'm on the board of several universities and they always have fights with their neighbors....So, that there were some misunderstandings or suspicions [between St. Benedict and the NEN], I knew that right from the start. But I thought the best way for us to narrow the gap there was to work together on a common project that everybody thought was a good thing—and that's what happened.

Fr. Munrow's desire to work with the NEN was significant not only because it presented a markedly different perspective on the university's "neighborly obligations" in its bordering communities than it had in previous years, but most importantly, because it instilled a belief among St. Benedict faculty, staff, and students—as well as skeptical NEN residents—that the university was authentically invested in the RCLC project. Sharon Dampier, a university employee and RCLC participant, described Fr. Munrow as a critical facilitator of the St. Benedict-NEN collaboration, stating, "There is no question if Father hadn't done that [supported the RCLC] we all wouldn't have known to do it too." Lon Norton added, "When you have the president of a university who is disposed to [collaborate with the neighborhood] and makes resources available and makes it a priority, that's the first thing."

Fr. Munrow was aware of his influence on the planning and development of the RCLC, recalling:

I knew that at critical times, as the representative of the university, that when I express an interest in something and encourage people to follow through that it would happen. So what I was pleased about is that it never turned out to be just my idea or my enthusiasm, but a lot of other people were really excited about what could happen there.

*The boundary-spanning administrator:* One of these "other people who were really excited" about what could happen with the RCLC was Lon Norton, a vice president at the university who had a significant role in the early conversations between St. Benedict and NEN representatives about how the RCLC would develop. Lon was an effective builder of trust between the disparate groups because he is a respected leader in both university and community circles. His clout within the university was evident in his position near the top of the organizational hierarchy, his far-ranging responsibilities, and his close relationship with President Munrow. However, what legitimized Lon's leadership in the eyes of many NEN residents was his longtime residence in the NEN and his extensive previous professional experience working in the Center City community as the director of a social service agency. He explained:

I think that I was perceived...as being somebody who was from the community versus a suit from St. Benedict. It was helpful. I don't think that I was looked at in the same way as a lot of people who are career St. Benedict employees would be looked at. Not that that's an impediment you can't get over, but that I was able to start out and people saw that I had done work on behalf

of the community and that opened up some doors. It gave me kind of a vote of confidence, an open door.

Lon's unique background facilitated his ability to act as a "boundary spanner" engaging in honest, unfiltered conversations with NEN residents about how the RCLC should take shape. Participants in these discussions voiced admiration for Lon's willingness to listen to others and value their opinions. Like Fr. Munrow, his ideas for the St. Benedict-NEN collaboration were openly contextualized in the previously troubled relationship between the two entities. His espoused rationale for increased commitment in the NEN was rooted in notions of altruism, faith, and historicity:

What people don't understand is that the greatest sins in this world are sins of omission, not commission. It's not something that you do as an evil against an individual, but it's blindness and denial. There are many references biblically about blindness and denial. It's not recognizing the needs, it's not putting others first, it's being completely aloof and clueless and distant from the needs of that neighborhood—and that can build up greater resentment, anger, and animosity....So that's how the neighborhood felt. They felt like St. Benedict had treated them with neglect and a great level of anxiety and distrust and disdain had built up over the years. So we had to work on that.

*The people's priest.* In addition to Fr. Munrow and Lon Norton, Father Dan McNabb, a longtime St. Benedict administrator and community advocate, was frequently identified as a central figure in the early planning phases of the RCLC. Like Lon, Fr. McNabb spent considerable time engaging NEN residents in conversations about how the former Aldi's/Goodwill buildings might best serve their needs. He was purposefully identified as a university representative in these talks for two major reasons. First, substantiating his claim that "my ministry was always to say how can we live with the community," his educational background (doctoral training and scholarly work that addressed issues of community organizing), religious disposition (a priest devoted to issues of social justice), and professional position (director of the university's Center for Social Concerns) prepared and motivated him to carry out such work. Second, as a former resident and frequent "walker of the neighborhood," Fr. McNabb had intimate relationships with many NEN residents. He understood the issues that concerned them on a daily basis. He was widely trusted as being "one of the people." Indeed, although he was officially a representative of the university, Fr. McNabb was predominantly cited as being a community advocate.

Monica Turner described the roots of the community's trust in Fr. McNabb and the faith that he had in the NEN residents:

A big move was when they sent Fr. McNabb. He is really a neighborhood person—in fact he lived next door to me....He lived in the community, worked in the community....Students and people knew him and they trusted him....The president sent someone to the neighborhood with the neighborhood trust....Someone that the people knew. You'd see Fr. McNabb walking. He had a car but he used to walk a lot—and he interacted with people in the neighborhood. He'd just stop and talk to folks and people got to know him and trust him....He always talked about bringing your gifts and talents to the table. You came to the table and you were heard. Always before it was, I think I equated to, you were invited to dinner but not able to eat. That's the way the university always operated. Come to the table, but sit in your chair and read. What Fr. McNabb did was say, "Come to the table, bring what you have, and we'll let you eat."

*The passionate advocate.* Monica Turner was also mentioned by numerous university- and neighborhood-based RCLC participants as a critically important actor in the planning of the RCLC. As a lifelong NEN resident and well-connected activist who had a deep, experientially based understanding of the St. Benedict-NEN relationship, Monica was commonly depicted as one of the primary voices of the neighborhood in its early conversations with the university about the Aldi's/Goodwill buildings. Participants in the study valued Monica's "honesty," "frankness," and "loyalty" throughout these discussions. Additionally, unlike Fr. Munrow, Lon Norton, and Fr. McNabb, whose primary influences were described as being at the front end of the RCLC process, Monica is now a full-time employee of the RCLC and continues to have an active influence on its development on a daily basis. Her leadership was described as a pivotal element to the functioning of the RCLC in two primary ways: She constantly watches out for the NEN's best interests by keeping a degree of skepticism amidst her emergent trust in the university's intentions in the NEN, and she provides the RCLC with a vital "welcoming connection" to the neighborhood.

In terms of her advocacy for the NEN in its ongoing conversation with the university about future directions for the RCLC, Monica's aforementioned frankness has served as a valuable asset. Her capacity for honestly discussing neighborhood issues with all interested parties, including high-ranking university administrators, was frequently cited as a factor that facilitated the manifestation of a community center that genuinely reflected the neighborhood's wants. She recalled one meeting that epitomized the way she operates:

I went to those meetings and I was just bawling them [St. Benedict administrators] out about something—I don't remember what it was, but they made me mad about something. And I was just fussing them out about it and the guy said, "But Monica, you work for me!" I said, "Yeah, and your point is? I came to tell the truth as I see it....I feel open, yes that's right! You got that right! And you know what? This is where I live—where I was born! I have raised my children here, my grandchildren!"

Lon Norton also described Monica's important role:

Monica is really, really critical. Monica was either going to be your biggest adversary or your biggest ally. Quite frankly, she was very skeptical about what St. Benedict was doing when we began. It was a test. If we could win her over, we could win the neighborhood over, because she had that kind of influence over others. We had lots of fights early on. She was also somebody who had built a great deal of credibility with her neighbors and she wasn't going to put that on the line real quickly or readily or at first glance with St. Benedict, which could easily turn its back on her and the neighborhood as had been done historically.

It is clear that Monica's passionate advocacy for the neighborhood has had a significant influence on the RCLC from its earliest stages.

As mentioned, Monica also played an important role as a "welcoming connection" to the neighborhood. Many residents of the NEN know Monica and, as a result, are much more likely to take advantage of RCLC services. RCLC director John Calipari said:

She brings in a wealth of relationships—and the track that goes with that has really helped us to open the doors....For many people it is certainly the opening into the center....Having already someone who they trust working here, someone who they know, has a track record of supporting the neighborhood.... Monica's just so well connected....It's a lifetime of her relationships.

In fact, Monica's effectiveness as a "welcomer" to the RCLC is not only dependent upon her multitude of relationships, but also the open manner in which she greets all visitors to the RCLC. She described:

When you walk through that door, you're the most important person in the world. And people get that sense that when they come that what they have to say is important and that they're welcome to come in the building and that we treat them with respect. You notice where my office is located [at the very front of the

building]. I never close my door ever, ever, ever. I want to let people come in.... The door is always open, and it's important. It's important to me to be available and to reach out to folks and make them feel comfortable, try to give them what they've come for.

*The humble director.* Like Monica, RCLC director John Calipari was repeatedly described as an effective bridge-building leader in the ongoing operations of the RCLC. He was selected to lead the RCLC from its inception in 2001 and continues to guide its daily work in the neighborhood to the present day. John's leadership style—"humble," "listening," "facilitative," and "fair"—was described by participants as one that is especially appropriate for his position at the RCLC because, rather than "dictating" what will be done, he values the authentic incorporation of community voices into all major RCLC decisions. Indeed, with a professional background in community organizing contexts, John described one of his primary responsibilities as that of a "convener" of parties in order to "make things happen." He described:

I'm not the charismatic leader. I'm not that person either who's going to stand up and quote chapter and verse of the Bible. Nor am I going to be the academician up there....But I'll want to bring in the academician and the preacher and the charismatic person when there's an opportunity to impact the children in this community or whatever problem we're dealing with. And if we can organize them together and things can happen then that's my role.

Therefore, it became apparent that, in conjunction with the efforts of Fr. Munrow, Lon Norton, Fr. McNabb, and Monica Turner, John's leadership of the RCLC's daily operations over its initial 5 years of operation has served as an appropriate vehicle for the continued legitimization of NEN residents' voices in its evolving relationship with St. Benedict. The data were particularly robust in suggesting that each of these leaders, working from different positions with diverse skills and dispositions, skillfully contributed to the ongoing reparation of the St. Benedict-NEN relationship and the development of the RCLC.

### ***Dialogue Facilitating Collaboration***

Viewed through a Freirean lens, these leaders facilitated dialogic action in their diverse contributions to the planning, development, and sustainability of the RCLC since 1998. The following section describes some instances of how



the constitutive elements of this dialogue—humility, faith in humankind, and hope—were evidenced.

*Humility in action.* The data suggest that St. Benedict, the powerful partnering entity in the context of the RCLC, purposefully demonstrated humility in several key areas as it partnered with the NEN. Notably, this humility was evidenced in the leaders' "dispositions of openness" to community wants and needs and in the numerous strategic RCLC decisions that were made to shift power publicly from the university to the neighborhood.

During the initial discussions that led to the opening of the RCLC, Fr. Dan McNabb emphasized that it was always the university's intent "to make sure that the [neighborhood] voice would be heard and to get them at the table when the big decisions were being made." This comment, indicating the university's open willingness to rely consistently upon NEN residents for contributions, appeared to be representative of all of the RCLC leaders' "dispositions of openness" that guided their collaborative attempts. Rather than fulfilling NEN residents' fatalistic expectations that St. Benedict was going to dictate forcefully the neighborhood's future after its purchase of the Aldi's/Goodwill building (a scenario that was likely within the university's means if it had so desired), leaders like Lon Norton, Fr. Dan McNabb, and John Calipari solicited the ideas of local residents as equal partners who were engaged in a common plight for community improvement. This humble sharing of power was described by NEN-based participants as a critical element to the burgeoning trust between the university and the neighborhood, for any attempts to veil traditional authoritarian university advances under the guise of "collaboration" would have been quickly identified and resisted by shrewd neighborhood advocates like Monica Turner. Accordingly, the humble leadership from the university in this context was neither altruistic nicety nor principled irrelevance; it was a moral impetus that proved strategically pragmatic.

Evidence of this humility was present in the visible decisions that were made to symbolize the university's sharing of power with the neighborhood. Noteworthy among these decisions was the naming of the center as the Rogers Community Learning Center after Rolanda Rogers, a longtime matriarch of the NEN. Spurred by Fr. McNabb and quickly supported by other leaders, this decision was made in order to indicate the university's intention that this was to be the neighborhood's center—not just St. Benedict's center in the neighborhood. It was a symbolic decision that continues to be greatly valued by NEN residents—many of whom had personal relationships with Rolanda. Denise Callaway, a lifelong NEN resident, described:

Being named after her [Rolanda], I think more people had an interest in coming....And my father just thought it was wonderful. He really did like it....He said they couldn't have named it after a better person.

As St. Benedict and NEN leaders intended and Denise inferred, numerous participants claimed that the naming of the RCLC was a critical factor in the center's evolving identity as being "of and for" the neighborhood at least as much as it is "of and for" the university.

Also significant indications of the university's intent to pass ownership of the RCLC to the neighborhood were its decisions to allow residents to choose the building's décor (carpet, furniture, paint colors, etc.) and to create the "Walls of Fame"—a hallway in the RCLC building that honors local residents who have made noteworthy contributions to the community over the years. Like the naming of the RCLC, these strategies presented evidence that the university wanted to center neighborhood voices and values during this collaborative process.

A final demonstration of humility in action was evident in the RCLC's "co-chair" system of leadership. Whereas many partnerships between institutions of higher education and their neighboring communities are predominantly guided by university-based leaders, this particular group is influenced by the leadership of Stephen Ames, a NEN resident and the community-based co-chair, and Sharon Dampier, a St. Benedict employee and the university-based co-chair. This was more than a symbolic gesture aimed at pacifying community members. It was a strategic decision grounded in the belief that the perspective of a community-based leader could establish trust and help authentically represent community interests in the planning and guidance of the RCLC. In this regard, it became clear that employing humble collaborative strategies benefited the RCLC's ability to get its work accomplished.

*Faith in action.* Rather than attempting to "fix neighborhood problems," it is apparent that the assets-based philosophy of collaboration employed throughout the RCLC planning, implementation, and operational phases demonstrated confidence in residents' capacities for playing pivotal roles in their neighborhood's future improvement. This faith in the neighborhood was evident in John Calipari's description of the RCLC's ultimate purposes:

We are in the business of helping people to become capable, effective adults, and youths for that matter, and what better way than to demonstrate that we have confidence in them. But it's not us advocating; it's helping them to advocate for themselves.

Instances of the RCLC's faith in the neighborhood include the hiring of NEN residents for key staff positions and the inclusion of, and value for, neighborhood input at RCLC's "critical junctures."

The hiring of local residents—six of the 10 current RCLC employees were born and raised in Center City—was certainly a noteworthy example of the partnership's neighborhood assets-based approach to collaborating. Unlike many other university-community partnerships that rely upon the expertise and opinions of outsiders to address key issues, the RCLC's value for institutionalizing the voices of area residents was built upon the assumption that those with experientially developed local knowledge can provide uniquely appropriate skills and ideas for neighborhood growth. This collaborative perspective was encapsulated in Sharon Dampier's statement:

Different people are bringing different things to the table. There's no way that I [a university employee] could bring as much knowledge about the actual neighborhood and the real-life issues that they face. I can't bring that and I would be foolish to think that I have the best insight into that.

The RCLC made an explicit effort to gain NEN input in its major decisions through the involvement of both the local resident employees and other NEN residents who participate in the RCLC in less formal capacities. This effort was made with recognition that partnership efforts that do not maintain steadfast faith in community perspectives will likely degenerate into paternalistic university "fix-it" ventures. Accordingly, when faced with critical decisions regarding policy conceptualization, program development, and employee hiring, NEN residents played significant roles at the RCLC. This input ensured that the neighborhood's assets, such as its diversity, will continue to shape the center's identity by providing the very foundation upon which the RCLC is built. According to Monica Turner:

I do not want to live in St. Benedictville, I would like to live in the Northeast Neighborhood.... There are a lot of differences. A real distinction between living in St. Benedict and living in the Northeast Neighborhood: The Northeast Neighborhood is a community—and it has a real diversity.

By maintaining faith in neighborhood capacities throughout its first 5 years of operation, the RCLC avoided working toward an expansion of "St. Benedictville," instead directing its vast university and NEN resources toward neighborhood growth "in its own skin."

*Hope for the future.* The hope that permeated the dialogue between campus and community markedly contrasts the fatalistic outlooks that, in years past, were commonly present in the area. As a result of the RCLC, neighborhood residents expressed increased hope in two ways that are especially of note: the future educational and professional opportunities of their children and the continued healing and evolution of their relationship with St. Benedict.

The colorful, eye-catching mural covering an outer wall of the RCLC symbolizes the hope that is fostered within the building. Created by children of the NEN, this artful representation of dreams to be achieved includes their hopeful images of peace and happiness as well as their optimistic revelation of such future careers as lawyers and doctors. The hope conveyed by the mural parallels the words of study participants, which indicated that RCLC programs have expanded the horizons of NEN children. By taking advantage of extensive reading, tutoring, and violence prevention programs, it is apparent that many NEN children have reconceptualized their ambitions for the future. According to Samantha Sosa, a St. Benedict student and 4-year RCLC tutor:

All the kids that come here believe. They believe that they can succeed. They believe that there's something great for them if they work hard for it....They realize that potential and they run with that potential. And it becomes something that they want to harness even when they leave this place at the end of the day.

The commitment of the RCLC to help make improvements in specific areas of children's lives (reading, math, violence prevention, etc.) was an important factor in establishing hope among all participants. Describing the necessity of making progress in areas of recognized need, Horton (2003) said:

The educational program, however, should focus on a definable step leading to the goal, or, to put it another way, the point of departure should be a recognized need to be examined in the light of the overall purpose. Such an educational concept enables students to hitch a star to their wagon. (p. 217)

Indeed, each RCLC program focused on definable steps needed to address specific individual and/or neighborhood needs. The purpose for each RCLC meeting, session, or program was closely linked to addressing individual and/or group-identified issues, so, as Horton (2003) suggested, each participant could "hitch a star to their wagon" (p. 217).

Along with the increased hope that NEN residents had for their educational and professional futures, not to be discounted was the hope shared

by St. Benedict- and NEN-based RCLC participants that their historical disconnection will continue to be healed in the months and years ahead. Hope abounded in the voices of study participants that at the dynamic intersection of diverse neighborhood assets and substantial university resources waits profound growth and renewal for all. The first step toward this intersection appeared to be the nascent feelings of accessibility that the partners have to each other's "turf," for not only did university participants describe increased levels of comfort and welcome in the neighborhood, but NEN residents spoke with heretofore unseen enthusiasm of their intentions to utilize the university. NEN resident Natasha Lanier explained:

I never really had a desire to even attend [St. Benedict], being raised here, and now that has kind of changed....My husband, he'd like one of our children to attend St. Benedict.

RCLC director John Calipari added:

I think it is safe to say that we've raised expectations....The expectation that the university and community relationship is going to be stronger, there's the expectation that you have access and you can do new things.

Indeed, in conjunction with the humility and the faith in neighborhood capacity that distinguished the RCLC process, it is certainly evident that the hope fostered throughout the collaboration also contributed to the "horizontalization" of the collaboration.

### ***A Faith-Based Dialogue***

To summarize, it is apparent that the RCLC partnership process—largely influenced by the efforts of five key leaders—avoided the common hierarchical pitfalls that plague other town-gown collaborations and effectively developed into a horizontal relationship rooted in humility, faith in neighborhood capacity, and hope for the future. In heeding the call of Maurrasse (2001) and others who have stated the case for increased attention to partnership processes that are marked by coequal participation, the RCLC employed collaborative means that encouraged greater equity and social justice as ends. It became clear, however, that the RCLC was distinguishable from other similar partnerships in that its procedural and outcome goals were openly situated in and significantly guided by notions of religious faith.

For instance, the influence of Catholic values could be found in St. Benedict's leaders' espoused motivations for establishing the RCLC. Describing such work as being aligned with how a Catholic university should operate, Fr. Munrow stated:

Among the reasons for us trying to be good neighbors is that we think that's very consistent with the nature of a Catholic university—to be in partnership and to be an advocate for the justice and well-being of everybody in our community.

Suggesting that neighborhood collaboration was essential to the university's "soul," Lon Norton added:

If St. Benedict has a great reputation nationally, even internationally, and our immediate neighbors think that we don't give a damn about them and they hold us in disdain, there is something fundamentally flawed about that scenario. So we need to do this, not just for the neighborhood, but for the soul of St. Benedict.

Therefore, although the RCLC is guided by a theory of action that resembles those of the University of Pennsylvania's efforts in West Philadelphia (Harkavy & Benson, 1998) and the University of Utah's work in West Salt Lake City (Miller, 2005b), its moral, religious motivations and justifications are described with terms like "compassion," "dignity," "soul," "grace," and "love" rather than the "enlightened self-interest" that the University of Pennsylvania's Harkavy and Benson (1998) cite as the institution's rationale for community collaboration.

## Discussion

It is apparent that the "disconnect" and "distrust" that previously described the relationship between St. Benedict and the NEN were mitigated to a degree by the work of the RCLC. It is worthwhile to note that the way the RCLC was planned and became operational appeared to play a significant role in the heightened connection and burgeoning trust between the university and the neighborhood. Although residents expressed gratitude for the myriad educational and social opportunities present at the RCLC, their value for being engaged as "equal partners" by the university resonated most clearly as the foundational element to their nascent friendship with the campus. This finding is consistent with the literature on university-school-community partnerships, which indicates that issues relating to the proportionality of power among collaborative participants have significant implications for partnerships' ultimate

effectiveness. Accordingly, as the RCLC moves forward after its promising first 5 years, it is recommended that the dialogical dispositions of humility, faith, and hope continue to define its operational framework. This article concludes with several suggestions that attempt to assist the continued development of the RCLC and also serve as helpful insights for other partnerships that seek similar relationships.

### ***Partnerships Should Work with Awareness of Content***

University-community partnerships do not operate in social or historical vacuums. The context in which each collaborative endeavor emerges and develops has a profound influence upon the attitudes, dispositions, and allegiances of all who become involved with them. An acute awareness of these contexts—such as the prior disconnection between St. Benedict and the NEN—is mandatory for all institutional and/or community leaders who engage in them. Only with this awareness can partnerships appropriately respond to current issues, issues that are very much affected by past practices and history. Partnerships that are not rooted in such historical awareness implicitly deny the importance of past inequities and injustices in the development of collaborative partnerships characterized by mutuality and equality.

### ***Partnerships Should Be Guided By Strategically Chosen Leaders***

One of the most critical elements to university-community partnerships is the leadership that guides them, as exemplified by the five individuals who influenced the emergence of the RCLC. Because, to a significant degree, they have the ability to form relationships that are rooted in humility, faith in neighborhood capacity, and hope for the future, a diverse representation of leaders is recommended. Certainly it is crucial to have financial, moral, and symbolic support from leaders who have positional authority, like Fr. Munrow and Lon Norton. However, it is equally vital to infuse neighborhood and/or boundary-spanning perspectives into the leadership structures of partnerships. Not only do these leaders, like the RCLC's Monica Turner, have valuable tacit knowledge of neighborhood relationships and workings, but their presence also engenders increased levels of trust among neighborhood residents and affirms the neighborhoods' capacities to make meaningful contributions to efforts.

### ***Partnerships Should Prioritize Communication***

In addition to maintaining an active awareness of their historical contexts and being guided by strategically representative leadership, the findings from



this study also indicated the importance of communication within complex, multifaceted collaborations. Formal and informal avenues of communication must remain open at all phases of collaborative work between university- and community-based participants, volunteers, and other constituents. This should entail thorough “pre-discussions” about the types of programs to be instituted, a statement of broad partnership values and principles, and the communication of more practical operational details relating to specific partnership programs, duties, and/or activities. Such open communication broadens all constituents’ understandings and expectations of partnership work, thereby fostering greater levels of hope that collaborators might systematically achieve their desired ends.

### ***Partnerships Should Build Upon Partners’ Greatest Assets***

Frequently cited by RCLC participants was their value for building the collaboration upon the assets of the NEN and the university. Rather than “starting from scratch,” the partnership demonstrated faith in neighborhood capacity during planning and implementation phases by centering its strengths, such as its diversity, its churches, and its passionately participative residents. The RCLC also values and builds upon unique university assets, like its value for social justice through a Catholic lens, in all the work that it does. These assets are more than generic contents of a “university-community collaboration checklist,” they are the constitutive elements of the partnership’s unique identity. It is in these elements that participants’ gifts flourish most profoundly and their loyalties deepen most significantly. Therefore, it is suggested that by embracing their local surroundings, the RCLC and other collaborations like it continue to mold their images in the shapes of their greatest assets.

### **Future Directions**

Continued studies and evaluations of university-community partnerships are needed. Like the efforts of the broader Northeast Neighborhood Initiative, which, since 2001 has sparked significant changes in NEN housing, roads, and commercial development, and the specific work of the RCLC, these types of partnerships have great potential for invigorating schools, communities, and, perhaps most fundamentally, heretofore mal-developed or undeveloped relationships. However, in order to maximize this potential, the growth of respectful, horizontally-governed partnerships should be more systematically grounded in empirical data that indicate “what works.” To this end, qualitative and quantitative studies that foreground issues of history and power in partnership contexts can help shape the continued discourse about how these



collaborations should proceed. Additionally, studies that examine notions of spirituality and leadership in partnership contexts would be helpful.

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